



# FROM 'ZI CHAR' STALL TO RESTAURANT CHAIN

The Paradise Group has shifted into mass mode with plans for a string of mid-market outlets in shopping malls

TEXT \_ CHEAH UIHOON

**B**ACK IN 2002, Eldwin Chua set up a *zi char* stall in Defu Lane and called it Seafood Paradise. The seafood part might have been accurate but surely "Paradise" was aspirational.

It was a one-man show seating all of 25 diners, but the Defu Lane stall soon gained a local following, and Mr Chua went to the other extreme to open Taste Paradise – a swanky, contemporary Chinese restaurant in Chinatown. That took off too, and Mr Chua then roped in his younger brother Edlan to open a 250-seater Seafood Paradise at the Singapore Flyer.

You could say things are spinning a lot smoother for the group than the Flyer as the Paradise Group has now moved into "mass mode" with plans to open up a chain of mid-market outlets in malls, with its new "Paradise Inn" concept.

The first outlet at Funan Mall has so far been a hit, even if it opened in February amid great economic uncertainty. And the winning combination

seems obvious: An inviting contemporary decor of black and red, a menu that offers a mix of homely and fine-dining fare, and a wide selection of specialty drinks and desserts.

Paradise Inn is basically an amalgamation of Crystal Jade and Soup Kitchen, but with a much younger feel. The decor is a re-creation of the traditional Chinese inn, such as in the use of stools around the tables. However, the whole look is contemporary – with customised furniture and cutlery, no less – boldly using black and red as the primary colours.

Menu-wise, there is the whole gamut of the best that Singapore restaurants have to offer. The first section starts with a chockful of traditional double-boiled soup choices (\$13.80 to \$15.80), dished out from a large pot that serves four to six. The menu ends with a wide selection of cold and hot desserts, similar to those offered in the Hong Kong-style cafes that have sprouted up all over town in the last few years.

In between, there are homely favourites like hand-chopped steamed minced pork and salted fish (\$8) and restaurant-style dishes like steamed *song* fish head with spicy bean paste sauce (\$16).

We quite enjoyed our warming double-boiled black chicken soup with ginseng, which was hearty though it had just a hint of ginseng. A good starter dish is the traditional stewed pork belly cut into slices which you can stuff into steamed white mantou buns (\$2.20 per piece). The meat is tender and steeped in the black sauce gravy. Another version, without the bread, is the *dongpo*, which has layers of meat and juicy white fat (\$12).

Then we tucked into a well-made poached Chinese spinach with trio of egg in superior stock (from \$14 upwards). The dish is comparable to the versions you find in some top Chinese restaurants, garnished with salted egg, century egg and regular egg.

For the steamed pork dish, the salted fish on top of the steamed minced pork is quite unusual, with a soft, pickled consistency to give the necessary salty kicker.

The dish that bowled us over though was the steamed *song* fish head that could easily have fed five, for only \$16. The base sauce was bean paste, but it was also chilli hot, and the fish didn't have a muddy flavour at all, as freshwater fish are prone to have. The *piece de resistance*, however, was the garnishing of crunchy pork lard, sprinkled all over the fish head. The restaurant's signature fried rice (\$10) was a bit of a bland letdown, without the smokey "wokked" aroma to it.

When it comes to desserts, Paradise Inn can hold its own against the Hong Kong cafes, with its

offering of steamed egg custard and milk custard, as well as mango pudding, double-boiled hashima and black sesame paste (from \$2.80 upwards). My dining companion, whose palate has been honed by Hong Kong's steamed custards, didn't find Paradise Inn's version to be exciting. But to less exacting palates, they should suffice.

With its substantial menu and modern decor, Paradise Inn has given diners a reason to drop by for lunch, tea, dinner and even supper; whether you're with colleagues, business associates, friends or family. The first outlet at Funan Mall has been promptly followed by one at West Coast Plaza and another at the Singapore Flyer – all within the first four months of this year.

We found the dining proposition to be rather appetising, and the mid-range prices won't bust your budget. Kudos to the Chua brothers for managing to come up with a wide range of familiar – some creative – dishes that appeal to our local tastebuds and presenting it all in one stylish package. **P**

**RATING:** ✓✓✓✓✓

For reservations, please call:

- Paradise Inn  
Funan Mall 6338-4018  
West Coast Plaza 6777-9950
- Taste Paradise  
Mosque Street 6226-2959
- Seafood Paradise  
Defu Lane 6487-2429  
Singapore Flyer 6336-5101

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** Paradise Inn's decor is a re-creation of the traditional Chinese inn but with a contemporary look  
**THIS PAGE,** clockwise from top left: Paradise Inn's homely favourites of minced pork with salted fish; braised pork buns; and steamed "song" fish head

